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24 March 1988

Mr. Mc Carthy
25.3.88

P.S.M.

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Mr. Nally

Counsellor A.I.

Box.

Dear Assistant Secretary

The mood at Westminster

Conversations over the past three days with about 20 M.P.s of all shades, and with journalists and other informed contacts including Murdo MacLean (the Usual Channels), suggest the following broad points.

- The initial reaction to last weekend's media coverage was very strong. Many M.P.s, who despite encouragement do not take an active interest in Irish affairs and do not normally attend Irish business, became puffed with outrage and conviction about doing something in response. What the something might be varied from demands for a revised (and tougher) policy of policing funerals to a demand for internment throughout Ireland and, in more cases than previously, to a demand for setting a date for withdrawal from Ireland in order to let the Irish get on with butchering each other. Interestingly, Members who usually get very little constituency mail on Irish matters, have had a flurry of mail in the past two days - much more, they say, than after the Harrods and Brighton bombs. The thrust of the correspondence is a demand for greatly enhanced direct action against terrorists. By and large relations with Dublin and the Agreement were not a feature of these letters.
- With some exceptions it is still possible, through patient briefing, to cool many of these feelings and to get M.P.s to see events in their context and in the light of the forces underlying them. It should be said, however, that it is becoming perceptively more difficult to do this. There is a widening view that events have moved beyond the capacity of existing frameworks to handle them. The majority of those talked to fall short of dismissing the Agreement, and most of them expressed satisfaction - even relief - that following a briefing they did not feel it necessary to do something about their general position on Northern Ireland (such as an approach to King or Howe, a statement in the House, a proposal to meet a group of other Members to discuss worries - the latter is a typical prelude to concerted action at Westminster, something Whips are very alert to).

- Backbenchers at Westminster, and some of the best journalists, echo the British Government's lack of wider coherence vis-a-vis recent events and the general drift in Northern Ireland. One is struck, when meeting one after the other, at the exasperation; anger without any proper sense of how to ventilate it (other than, as we have seen, to make indignant generalisations about getting the terrorists); a resurgence of frustrated impatience with Ireland as a whole. The complexity of the issues elude their instinctual approach to policy questions, that of self-interested pragmatism; and this further fuels their primary response to events such as last Saturday's (it has to be said that no amount of violence toward the UDR, the RUC and Northern Irish or Irish civilians of any religious persuasion could come anywhere near provoking the same reaction in Britain to Saturday's killings - and the sort of killings they were - of their own English soldiers).
- In fact the vehemence of this response, and its simplicity, have, so far at least, kept the focus of the matter off Dublin's relations with London, the Agreement, questions of cross-border security, and so on. Dublin's carefully-measured responses in very difficult all-round circumstances to a series of events have been noticed, of course, by seasoned observers and those directly involved in Northern Ireland affairs; but they have to be brought to the attention of many whose approach to these questions is very much the broad brush one. As the immediate responses to recent events settle, however, it is probably true to say that there is a risk that the Anglo-Irish relationship and the Agreement may be caught in the net when many Westminster M.P.s look around for the reasons behind those events. The rhetoric used by both Governments in November 1985 has unfortunately now become something that is a ready weapon to hand with which to beat the Agreement process; statistics of violence and murder are another easy - too easy - weapon to hand. So far the Unionists and their friends have not taken full advantage of all this to prey on large numbers of wavering colleagues. This is in large part due to their lack of a sense of strategy and overall capacity: if they had these things, and an articulate leadership, there is little doubt that we could not contain a serious haemorrhage of support across the backbenches (and not at all just on the right).

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- There is, then, a serious state of drift at Westminster and it can be reiterated that this probably reflects something similar at Government level. A previous sense of the need for pre-emptive rather than simply reactive policies has been largely lost sight of. Parliament as a whole tends to take inspiration from decisive policy direction at Government level - we saw this in 1985. M.P.s are, however, strikingly rudderless when they do not get that lead and direction in areas they do not properly comprehend; they are more so when the lead and direction previously there is seen to be somewhat adrift; and they are more so again when they are faced with graphic events which are precisely the sort of thing they felt were to be pre-empted by the policies enshrined in the lead and direction given in 1985.

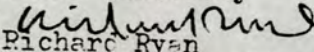
Having made the previous points, it is natural to come back to the fact that recent events are quite independent of our policies and actions, take place despite these, and in some major cases in the face of our perception that British policies fuel them.

Leaving wider arguments and justifications aside for a moment, however, it is no doubt true that strong support for our policies at Westminster is not just good and useful in itself, but can at times of difficulty, and when carefully channelled, be of considerable assistance in dealing with the British Government. Conservative backbenchers do not, of course, attack the Government on the floor of the House. When, however, they are convinced that something needs to be said, they can and do undertake action behind the scenes vis-a-vis Ministers and Whips. We will of course continue to impress on as many of them as possible the need to see events in their context and in the light of underlying realities; and to make sure that the Government's positions on issues are more clearly understood.

Getting the British Government to see the need for a more planned, longer-term and coherent set of policies based on their formal commitment to the Agreement, and to get across the need for co-ordination of policies at Government level in London in order to avoid debacles such as those seen recently, is something that we could usefully (and, at present, with a measure of authority) now press them hard on at all levels. The co-ordination of such pressure could perhaps be usefully considered at both political and official levels.

At the backbench level in Westminster, it would be very useful if we could bring some small groups of carefully-selected, influential M.P.s to Dublin for discussions at political level.

Yours sincerely


Richard Ryan
Westminster-Counsellor